CHAPTER ONE
A GRAND FETE
1907

The lace on my party frock itched horribly. I don't understand how they can make things as complex as motorcars or machines that fly but can't invent itchless lace. Although Mother didn't seem to be plagued with this problem, I would have to pay close attention to the other ladies at the reception this evening to see if they exhibited any symptoms.

'You're surprisingly quiet, Theodosia,' Father said, interrupting my thoughts.

'Surprisingly'? Whatever did he mean by that, I wonder?

'I would have thought you'd be chattering a mile a minute about Lord Chudleigh's reception.'

Tonight was to be my big introduction to professional life. And I planned to savour every second of it. I would be the first eleven-year-old girl ever to walk in their midst. What if they should ask me to make a speech? Wouldn't that be grand? I would stand there, with all eyes on me – keepers and lords and sirs and all sorts of fancy folk – and then I would . . . have to say something. Maybe having to speak wouldn't be such a great idea after all.

Mother put her gloved hand on Father's arm. 'She's most likely nervous, Alistair. The only young girl among so many important dignitaries and officials? I would have been tongue-tied at her age.'

Well. *That* wasn't very comforting. Maybe I should have been more nervous than I was. The carriage turned a corner and my stomach dipped uneasily.

We reached Lord Chudleigh's residence in Mayfair, a large red brick mansion with white columns and window frames. At the door, a butler bowed and greeted Father by name. Then we were motioned inside, where we joined an absolutely mad throng of people, all dressed in fine frocks and evening coats. There were marble floors, and the hallway sported Greek columns. Actually, the whole place had the touch of a museum about it: Grecian urns, a bust of Julius Caesar, and even a full coat of armour standing to attention. Suddenly I was glad of all that itchy lace – otherwise I would have felt dreadfully underdressed.

I slipped my hand into Mother's. 'Lord Chudleigh's house is even grander than Grandmother Throckmorton's,' I whispered.

'Don't let her hear you say that,' Father said.

'How could she possibly hear me?' I scoffed. 'She's miles away in her own grand house.'

The look on Father's face gave me pause. 'Isn't she?' I asked hesitantly.

'I'm afraid not.' His tone was clipped, as if he wasn't very happy about it, either. 'She moves in the same social circles as Lord Chudleigh.'

That was the sort of news that could ruin an entire evening. One might think it was a bit of an overstatement, if one didn't know my grandmother.

I stared out at the crowd of people, desperate to spot Grandmother. If I saw her first, it would make avoiding her all that much easier.

Although really, I oughtn't worry, I told myself as we moved into the enormous ballroom. I was on my best behaviour and had no intention of drawing any unpleasant attention to myself. Not even Grandmother would be able to find fault with me tonight. Except she believes children in general, and me in particular, should be seen as little as possible and heard even less. Just my being here would be an enormous affront to her sense of propriety.

Music played in the background, but people weren't dancing – they just stood about talking and drinking champagne. We weaved our way among the guests until a tall man who looked vaguely familiar waved us over. Father immediately altered his course and began herding Mother and me in that direction.

When we reached the gentleman, he leaned forward and thumped Father on the back. 'It's about time you showed up, Throckmorton. At least you had the good sense to bring your lovely wife.'

Mum put her hand out, but instead of shaking it, the man lifted it to his lips and kissed it! He'd better not try that with me, was all I could think. Luckily, he didn't. In fact, he ignored me until Father cleared his throat and put his hand on my

shoulder. 'And this is my daughter, Theodosia, Lord Chudleigh. The one we spoke about.'

'Ah yes!' Lord Chudleigh bent over and peered down at me. 'Our newest little archaeologist, eh? Following in your mother's footsteps, are you, girl? Well done.' He reached out and patted me on the head. Like a pet. I'm sorry, but you simply don't go around patting people on the head like dogs!

Father tightened his hand on my shoulder in silent warning. 'So. What's all this I keep hearing about an artefact of your own?'

Chudleigh looked smug. 'After you came rushing home in such a hurry, I had to make a quick run down to Thebes to secure the site.'

Father winced slightly. 'So you've mentioned.' Under his breath he added, 'Three times.' Then, louder, 'I'm terribly sorry about that. If my son hadn't been so ill . . .'

'Eh, it felt good to get out into the field and get a taste of what you do.' Chudleigh nudged Father with his elbow. 'I got a chance to find a little something of my own down there, too. Standing in plain sight, it was. Don't know why you and your wife didn't send it straight along with the first batch. In fact, I have a treat for everyone tonight.' He puffed up his chest and rocked back on his heels. 'In honour of my most recent find, we're going to have a mummy unwrapping!'

A mummy unwrapping! My stomach recoiled at the very idea. Didn't he understand that mummification was a

sacred death rite of the ancient Egyptians? That unwrapping a mummy would be the same as undressing his grandfather's dead body? 'Sir,' I began, but Father's hand pressed down on my shoulder again. Surely I was going to be bruised black and blue from all this hand clamping.

'Fascinating, sir,' was all he said. 'We'll look forward to it.'

'Good, good. Thought you might.' Chudleigh nodded. Father excused us, took Mother's elbow and mine, and began to steer us away.

Mum muttered under her breath, 'I thought unwrappings went out with Queen Victoria.'

I whirled around to Father when we were out of earshot. 'Why didn't you say something? That's desecration, isn't it?'

'Yes, I suppose it is, Theodosia. But I'm not personally responsible for every mummy that comes out of Egypt, you know. Besides, the man's on the museum's board. I can't risk getting on his bad side, and telling him that unwrapping his new mummy is bad form would certainly do that.'

I turned to Mother.

'Oh, no,' she said. 'Don't look at me. I've already got a hard enough row to hoe being a woman in this field. I can't afford any appearance of sentimentality or emotion.'

Well, it had been worth a try. 'Where do you think Chudleigh found the mummy?' I asked. 'I never saw one in the tomb or annexe. Did you, Father?'

'Well, no. But then again, I was preoccupied with getting

you out of there safely. Now, let's get this wretched evening over with. *Oomph!'*

Mother removed her elbow from Father's ribs. 'Tonight's supposed to be a treat,' she reminded him.

Indeed, I had hoped for a lovely evening out with my parents. I had also hoped that my dressing up in fancy clothes and attending one of their social events might have allowed them to see me a little differently.

Or simply *see* me, rather than spend the entire evening looking over my head at other adults.

Pretending I hadn't heard them, I raised up on my tiptoes, trying to spot the mummy. I couldn't believe I would have overlooked a mummy lying about in plain sight, even if I had been being chased by the Serpents of Chaos.

It was hopeless. There were too many people, all of whom were taller than I was. When I pulled my gaze back down, I found an elderly man examining me through his monocle as if I were a bug at the end of a pin. A very round woman dressed in mustard-coloured ruffles lifted her lorgnette to the bridge of her nose, then tut-tutted. Honestly! You'd think they'd never seen an eleven-year-old girl before.

'I suppose we'd best go pay our respects to Mother.' Father made the suggestion with the same enthusiasm he might have shown for leaping off the London Bridge straight into the foul, icy water of the river Thames.

Which was precisely how I felt about seeing Grandmother, frankly. Luckily, the crowd shifted just then and I spied someone I recognised. 'Oh look, Father! There's Lord

Snowthorpe.' And although he wasn't one of my favourite people, he *was* standing next to one of my favourite people, Lord Wigmere. Only, I wasn't supposed to know Wigmere even existed, as he was the head of the Brotherhood of the Chosen Keepers, a secret organisation whose sworn duty was to keep watch over all the sacred objects and artefacts in the country. Because the British Empire had amassed quite a few relics and ensorcelled items, it was quite a job. It was the Brotherhood that stood between our country and any of that ancient magic getting loose and wreaking horror upon us. Well, them and me, that is. I waved at the two men.

'No, Theo!' Father hissed. 'I don't wish to speak to—'

'Throckmorton!' Lord Snowthorpe called out.

'Oh, blast it all. Now look what you've done.'

Didn't Father realise that Snowthorpe was a hundred times better than Grandmother? Besides, I was hoping one of these gentlemen might be as repulsed by the mummy unwrapping as we were. Since they didn't work for Lord Chudleigh, perhaps they could put a stop to it.

When we reached Snowthorpe, Lord Wigmere winked at me, then ever so slightly shook his head, letting me know I wasn't to let on I knew him. I winked back.

There were a lot of false hearty hellos and good-to-see-yous exchanged, then Snowthorpe got down to his real reason for wanting to say hello: snooping. 'I say, did that Heart of Egypt of yours ever turn up?' he asked.

Father stiffened, and Mother raised her nose into the air. 'I'm afraid not,' she said. 'The burglar got clean away.'

That was a subject I wouldn't mind avoiding for a while longer. Say, a lifetime. My parents had no idea that I had been the one to return the Heart of Egypt to its proper resting place in the Valley of the Kings. It had been the only way to nullify the dreadful curse the artefact had been infected with. Of course, I'd had a bit of help from Wigmere and his Brotherhood of the Chosen Keepers. But my parents didn't know that, either.

'What was all that rot you fed me about having it cleaned, then?' Snowthorpe demanded.

'We . . .' Father turned to Mother with a desperate look on his face. She stared back, fumbling for something to say.

They couldn't have looked more guilty if they tried, so I spoke up. 'The authorities had asked us to keep quiet until they made a few inquiries. They didn't want the perpetrators to catch wind of how much they knew or who they suspected.'

Four pairs of eyes looked down at me in surprise.

'Isn't that what they said, Father?' I prompted.

'Yes,' he said, recovering nicely. 'Exactly what they said.'

Wigmere's moustache twitched. 'Do introduce me to this charming young lady, Throckmorton.'

As if we needed any introduction! We'd only worked closely together on averting one of the worst crises ever to reach British soil.

'Forgive me. Lord Wigmere, this is my daughter, Theodosia Throckmorton. Theodosia, this is Lord Wigmere, head of the Antiquarian Society.'

I gave a proper curtsy. 'I'm very pleased to meet you, sir.'

'And I you.'

Before Snowthorpe could begin jawing on again about the Heart of Egypt, I decided to raise my concerns. 'Have you heard what Lord Chudleigh's planning for this evening?'

I felt Father scowl at me, but I did my best to ignore him, which was rather difficult when his heated gaze threatened to burn a hole through my skull.

Snowthorpe brightened. 'You mean the mummy unwrapping?'

'Yes, but don't you think it's wrong to do it as . . . entertainment?'

Snowthorpe dismissed my words with a wave of his hand. 'Gad no! It's good for business, that. People love mummies, and whenever their interest goes up, so do museum ticket sales.'

'But isn't it desecration?'

The pleasant expression left Snowthorpe's face and he looked down at me, almost as if seeing me for the first time. 'You sound just like Wigmere here. He'd have us ship all our artefacts back to Egypt if he had his way.'

Well, certainly the cursed ones, anyway. I sent a beseeching look in Wigmere's direction, but he shook his head sympathetically. 'I already tried and got nowhere. Chudleigh's too intent on having his fun.'

Disappointment spiked through me. I looked over my

shoulder. The crowd had broken up a bit. I caught a glimpse of a table with guests clustered around it, but I still couldn't see the mummy itself.

Really, this fete of theirs was no fun at all. Not what I thought of as a proper party. I caught yet another old codger staring at me and realised that such scrutiny had made me beastly thirsty. I suddenly craved a glass of lemon smash or cold ginger beer. As I searched the crowd for the man with the refreshment tray, yet another old lady examined me through her opera glasses. I wrinkled my nose. Didn't these people realise how rude that was?

The woman dropped her glasses, and I was dismayed to find myself staring into the shocked face of Grandmother Throckmorton! I quickly turned away, pretending I hadn't seen her.

Seconds later, a very stiff-looking footman appeared at Father's side. 'Madam wishes me to request you attend her immediately.'

'What?' he asked, then caught sight of his mother. 'Oh yes, of course!' He bid goodbye to Wigmere and Snowthorpe, then herded us over to where Grandmother was conversing with a rather short, barrel-shaped man.

When we reached her, she offered up her cheek to Father for a kiss. He did so (grudgingly, I'm sure), and then she turned to Mother and inclined her head slightly. 'Henrietta.'

'Madam.' Mother nodded back.

Grandmother ignored me completely. She still wasn't

speaking to me for having run away while under her care. Even so, I wanted to prove I could be polite even if she couldn't and gave my very best curtsy. 'How do you do, Grandmother? It's very good to see you again.'

Grandmother sniffed in disapproval, then asked Father, 'What is she doing here?'

'Now, Mother. She did make a rather remarkable find, locating that secondary annexe to Amenemhab's tomb. Lord Chudleigh suggested we bring her along to celebrate her first find for the museum.'

'This is no place for children and her schedule is already far too irregular. If you cannot see to her proper upbringing, then perhaps I shall take her to hand.' Grandmother studied me for a long moment before continuing, 'Have you had any luck in locating a new governess for her?'

Mother and Father exchanged guilty glances. I could tell they'd forgotten all about it. 'Not yet. But we'll keep looking.' Mother missed the look of scorn Grandmother sent her way, but I didn't. I narrowed my eyes and glared at the old bat.

Except she was so busy ignoring me, she missed it and turned to the man standing beside her. I was left to stew on the idea of Grandmother overseeing my upbringing. I was torn between horror at the thought and fury at her treatment of Mother.

'Alistair, I'd like you to meet Admiral Sopcoate.'

Admiral Sopcoate had a jolly face. He was quick to catch my eye, then smiled. I liked him immediately.

Admiral Sopcoate shook Father's hand. 'What is it you do, again, Throckmorton?'

Father opened his mouth to respond, but Grandmother talked over him. 'He's the Head Curator of the Museum of Legends and Antiquities.'

When Grandmother said nothing more, Father quickly stepped in. 'And this is my wife, Henrietta. She's the museum's archaeologist and brings us a number of our most spectacular finds.'

Grandmother sniffed.

'And this is my daughter, Theodosia,' Father continued.

Admiral Sopcoate reached out and took my hand. (No head patting or hand kissing here! I knew I liked him for a good reason.) 'Pleased to meet you, my dear.'

'And I you, sir.' Still determined to be on my best behaviour, I added, 'Perhaps you'd like to come by and see our museum someday? We'd be happy to give you a tour.'

Grandmother's eyes flared in irritation. She fixed me with a gaze that clearly said, *Do not dare speak again in my presence,* then turned back to the admiral. 'We were just discussing Admiral Sopcoate's newest addition to the home fleet, the *Dreadnought*.'

'Yes! Have you seen her yet, Throckmorton?' Sopcoate asked.

'I can't say I have,' Father said. 'Although I've read a bit about it in the paper.'

'The *Dreadnought* is the newest crown jewel in His

Majesty's fleet,' Sopcoate explained. 'Makes every other battleship in the world obsolete.'

'If you ask me,' Grandmother butted in, 'we can't have enough battleships. Not with Germany's determination to become the world's greatest naval power.'

'Now, now, Lavinia,' Admiral Sopcoate reassured her. 'The British Navy is twice as strong as the next two navies combined.'

Lavinia! He'd called her by her Christian name! I'd forgotten she even had one.

'Not if Germany has its way,' she answered darkly. 'They are determined to challenge our naval supremacy.'

'Don't worry.' Sopcoate gave a jolly wink. 'Once those Germans see the *Dreadnought,* they'll put aside their misguided ideas of naval equality with England.'

'But isn't that rather like baiting a bear?' Father asked. 'How do you know they won't come out swinging, determined to build even more battleships of their own?'

Couldn't grown-ups talk of anything besides politics and war? I knew that the Germans and the British were on the outs with each other, but if you asked me – although no one did – that was mostly the fault of the Serpents of Chaos. They were a secret organisation dedicated to bringing about disorder and strife in their quest to dominate the world. Specifically, they wanted Germany and Britain at each other's throat. They wanted instability and utter chaos so they could move in and seize power. However, now that

Wigmere and I had foiled their plans, this whole war-cry nonsense would surely die down.

Luckily, before the adults could go on too long, we were interrupted by a faint clinking sound. Lord Chudleigh was striking his champagne glass with a tiny fork. 'Time has come, everyone. Gather round. Here's your chance to see a mummy unwrapped, the unveiling of the secrets of the Egyptians.'

An excited murmur ran through the crowd, and everyone shuffled over to the table on which the mummy lay. I tugged on Father's hand. 'Do I have to watch, Father? Can't I wait over there?'

He patted my shoulder. 'There's nothing to be afraid of, you know.'

Of course I knew that! *That* wasn't the issue. It just seemed wrong to be unwrapping the poor mummy in front of all these gawking visitors who didn't give a fig about ancient Egypt or the scholarly pursuit of Egyptian burial practices.

As we drew closer, I made a point of hanging back behind Mother and Father, but then Admiral Sopcoate stepped aside. 'Here, young lady. Come stand in front of me so you can see better. You don't want to miss this!'

Of course, he was just being kind. I opened my mouth to say, 'No thank you,' but caught Grandmother's eye. The warning glint told me that refusing wasn't an option. Biting back a sigh, I stepped forward and found myself in the front row, merely three feet away from the mummy on the table.

'This unidentified mummy was found inside the newly discovered tomb of Amenemhab,' Chudleigh went on. 'We're hoping that by unwrapping him tonight, we will learn more about who he was, as well as insights into the mystery of mummification. Are you ready?'

A wave of assent rose up from the gathering.

'Throckmorton, Snowthorpe, would you do the honours, please?'

Father blinked in surprise. He quickly hid the look of distaste that spread across his face and stepped dutifully forward.

'Let's start from the feet, shall we?' Snowthorpe suggested.

I thought about closing my eyes, then wondered if Grandmother Throckmorton would be able to tell. Testing the theory, I screwed my eyes shut – just for the merest of seconds. Immediately there was a sharp poke in my shoulder blade and a disapproving sniff.

I opened my eyes and thought briefly of handing her a handkerchief. Honestly! I didn't see how it was rude to close one's eyes but perfectly all right to sniff constantly, like one of those pigs that can root out truffles.

I turned my attention back to the front, but looked steadfastly at Father instead of the mummy.

It takes a surprisingly long time to unwrap a mummy. To entertain his guests, Lord Chudleigh jawed on about mummy legends and curses – the most sensational rubbish he could find, and most of it not even close to the truth.

When he got to the part about how they used to grind up mummies to be ingested for their magical properties – that part true, unfortunately – I was so utterly revolted that I blurted out, 'You're not going to grind this one up, are you?'

There was a long moment of silence in which everyone chose to stare at me, and I suddenly remembered my promise to do nothing to call attention to myself.

Chudleigh gave a false laugh. 'No, no. Of course not. This one will become a part of my own personal collection.'

'Oh. I beg your pardon,' I said, vowing to keep my mouth shut from now on.

At last Father and Snowthorpe came to the mummy's head. I studiously kept my eyes glued to Father's face. When the last bandage was lifted away, the crowd gasped in delighted horror.

I will not look, I will not look, I told myself. But sometimes the more you concentrate on *not* doing something, the more drawn you are to doing it. In the end, my curiosity got the better of me and I looked.

'Behold – the unknown priest of Amenemhab!' Lord Chudleigh called out.

A smattering of applause ran through the crowd. Unable to help myself, I stepped forward, my eyes fixed on the mummy's face.

It was a face I had seen only a few short months ago, when I'd been forced to confront three of the Serpents of Chaos in Thutmose III's tomb. Their leader's words

rang in my ears. *That is twice he's failed me. There will not be a third time.*

'Oh no, Lord Chudleigh.' The words bubbled out before I could stop them. 'That isn't an unknown priest of the Middle Dynasty. That's Mr Tetley. From the British Museum.'